

Walking the Talk of Presuming Competence

First Hand Experiences
from
Tracy Thresher

***“Don’t underestimate me.
I know more than I say,
think more than I speak,
& notice more than you realize.”***

-Tracy Thresher



I am Tracy Thresher from the land of Green Mountains. To be in this place of creating change in the world is fabulously wonderful. I started my path many moons ago to educate myself in the school of self-advocacy and my life has truly become the one I dreamed of.



I do not speak because I have autism. Autism means that I have a difficult time controlling my movements. It means that I find it difficult to do ordinary things that are quite easy for others. Most people take their ability to talk for granted and I take my inability to talk quite seriously.

I have had the great opportunity to share my vision of changing the world's view of how they perceive people with disabilities. Together, Larry and I share our stories of having intelligence inside of us that is not often placed highly in the perception of society.



This misperception is mostly due to lack of knowledge by the general population who tend to judge outward appearances. Bob Williams calls this the “cloak of incompetence” that society places on individuals who are labeled disabled.



I will start off with my life before typing. It is with a grain of salt that typing was my way to gaining respect from others; like Bob Williams, when I didn't have certain tools I was viewed on behavior and appearance.





Teachers working with me did not know that my intelligent thoughts were there, so they focused on the behavior and it felt like I was treated with a different attitude compared to other students.

I was isolated in my school environment. For most of my day, I was in a special classroom doing boring puzzles.

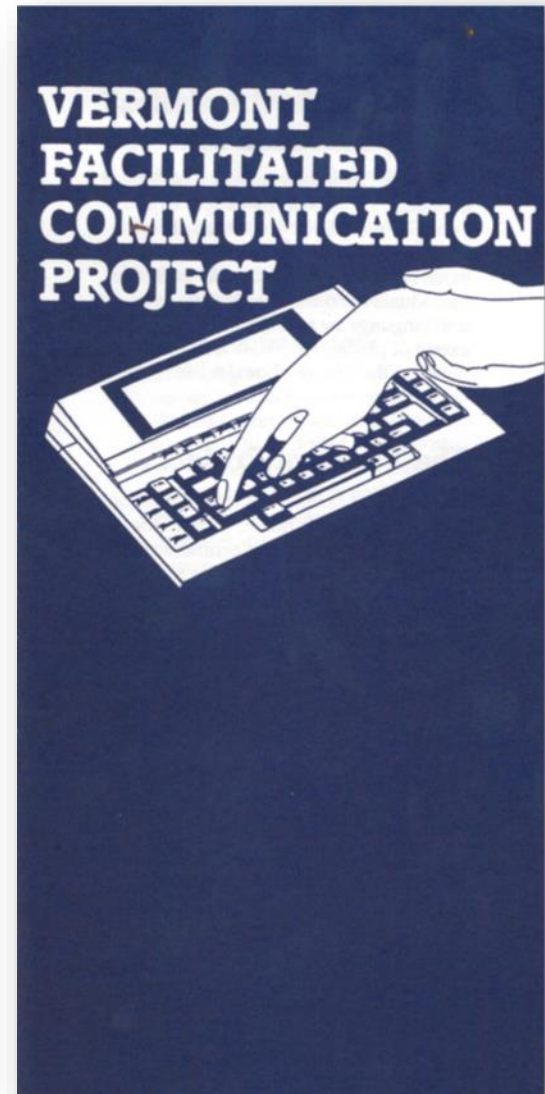
I was an intelligent person doing rote time fillers and missing out on adventures of learning history, literature and particularly lacking in friendships with others.





I felt heavy with anxiety most days because my stuck thoughts had no way to come out so my behaviors became my only communication.

I was in my twenties when my life took a path towards communication and I was chosen to be a part of an Facilitated Communication project. I was one of the first people in my Green Mountains of Vermont to be treated to this life changing mode of communication. It was scary and exciting to have the foundation of a new thing in my life.





I was one lucky man to meet Alan Kurtz in 1990. Alan was motivated to unlock my wisdom. He treated me to intelligent conversation. It was a wonderful time in my life because for the very first time I was being seen as someone with something to say.



Being spoken to in an intelligent manner was exhilarating. My inner thoughts, for so long had hidden in my mind looking for light like trees needing to flourish. Alan understood my intelligence, and it was not easy, but we pushed through my sometimes crazy behavior and I could pass reliable thoughts.



I am now working at typing real thoughts and that is possible with well-trained facilitators. The good part is that I have had fantastic really hard working facilitators and with them I have expressed many thoughts and had good things happen in my life.

I experience big time problems with anxiety, impulsive movement problems (poor impulse control), perseveration, high muscle tone, and lack of proprioception. This affects everything I do in life.



With time and patience I can have some really thoughtful conversations. What works for me is communicating with thinking, patient people who understand my autism and work through the problems of anxiety and impulsive movement to focus on thoughtful communication.





Volume of communication is hearing my voice and taking the time to type and talk with me. Wanting to type is one thing, having people to talk to is another. So much of the communication process depends on people taking the time to listen and to ask enticing questions.



Sometimes I think saying the words is what will convince others of how I really do understand. But of course, I can't say the words and passively stand alone- hoping that the person trying to communicate with me will see that I want social contact, relationship, and conversation.



With a respectful favorite communication partner I can experience those things. Without people satisfying my meaningful typing conversations I am at risk as being labeled as not understanding, not wanting to communicate, or wanting to do something else.

On my journey with traveling the world to film Wretches & Jabberers I was able to release the old dark cloak of autism. What an experience that was! My life is now mine to teach others about overcoming communication barriers. I believe it is important to break down barriers of labeling to move to inclusion.





I have traveled the world with Harvey Lavoy, Larry Bissonnette, and Pascal Cheng--as the Fab Four--typing pearls of wisdom to educators, parents, professionals, and students to change their views of disability.



My mind has been extremely focused on the power of inclusion. Inclusion, like communication, is paramount to healthy children and long term success. I want educators to understand that all children benefit from inclusion because all children can make contributions with proper supports.



Inclusion is not mainstreaming. More than idealistic political correctness it is celebrating our interconnectedness. Lessons of humanity lift our social fabric to magical tapestries where natural abilities may soar. Like Larry and I have communicated to diverse audiences in our travels, we are first men with intelligence.



One of the best questions Larry and I have been asked was, “What do you tell parents of kids with disabilities who oppose inclusion?” My response: “What kind of life are we talking about with seclusion and sameness and focused on disability? Now that we are here, it’s due to being included. What hope is there without seeing us in the mix?”

Even though my friends and I possess intelligent ideas, the people in the educational system for the most part have historically not understood how to educate us. Teaching kids, parents, and teachers is one of my goals.



I want to plot out the path toward training teachers to look at their students with a wide lens of possibility. The lens is the way to see the pupil's intelligence that is always there but sometimes has difficulty coming out through communication.

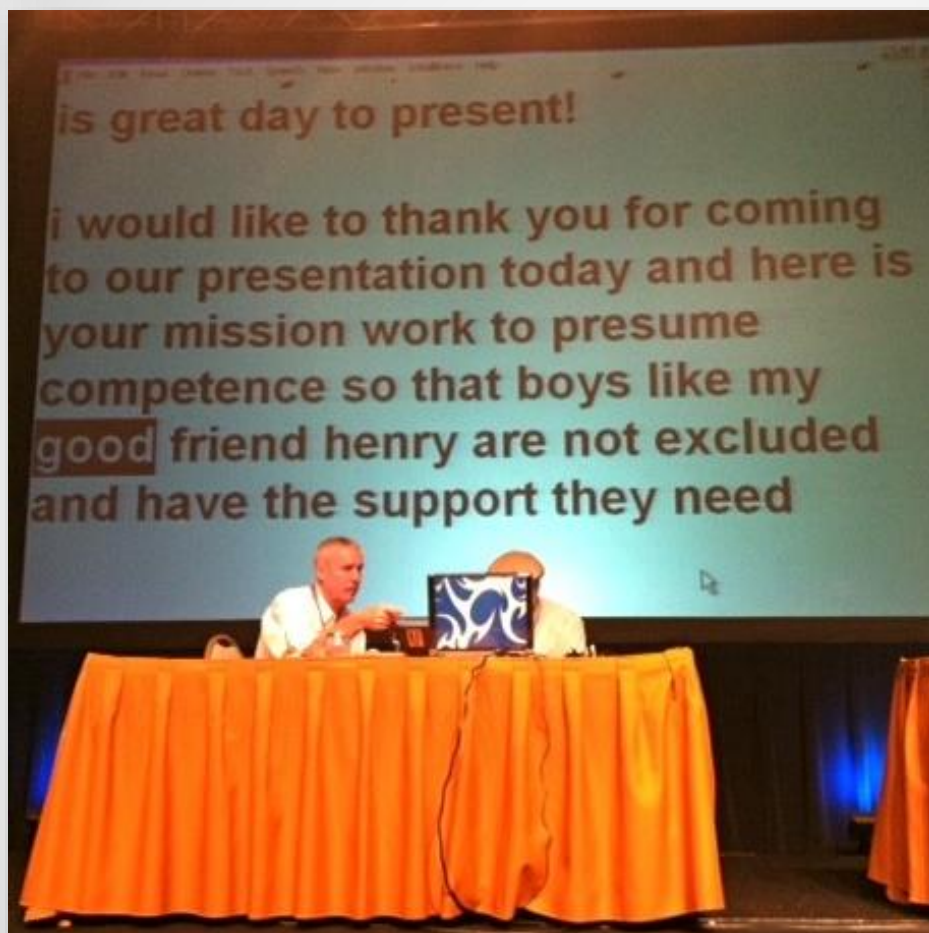




It is imperative that educators think about presuming competence and look for ways to see the intelligence in all of us. The student should not have to prove they are capable of learning. The school needs to provide the educational experiences to teach the student literacy, communication, and skills to be a learner.

It really is a wide open world with a reliable way to communicate. I want to be a life force in changing people's attitude towards disability. I am a self-advocate who is inspired by those who want to share their voice.



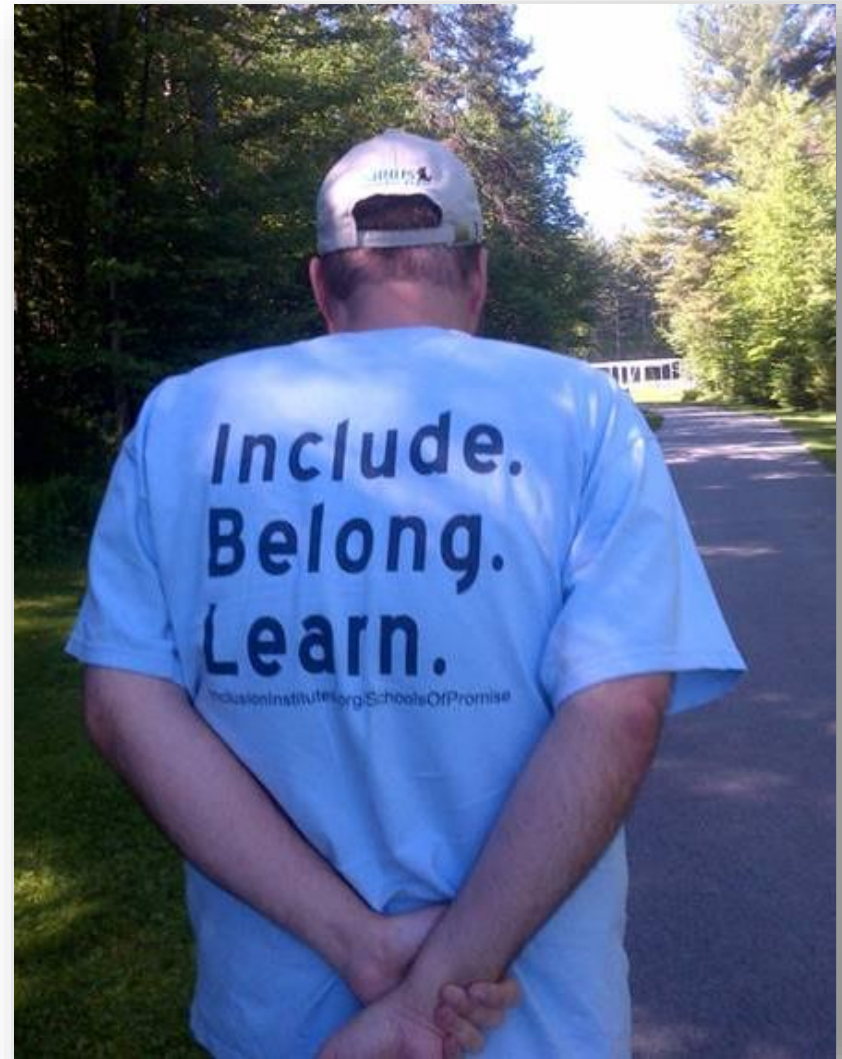


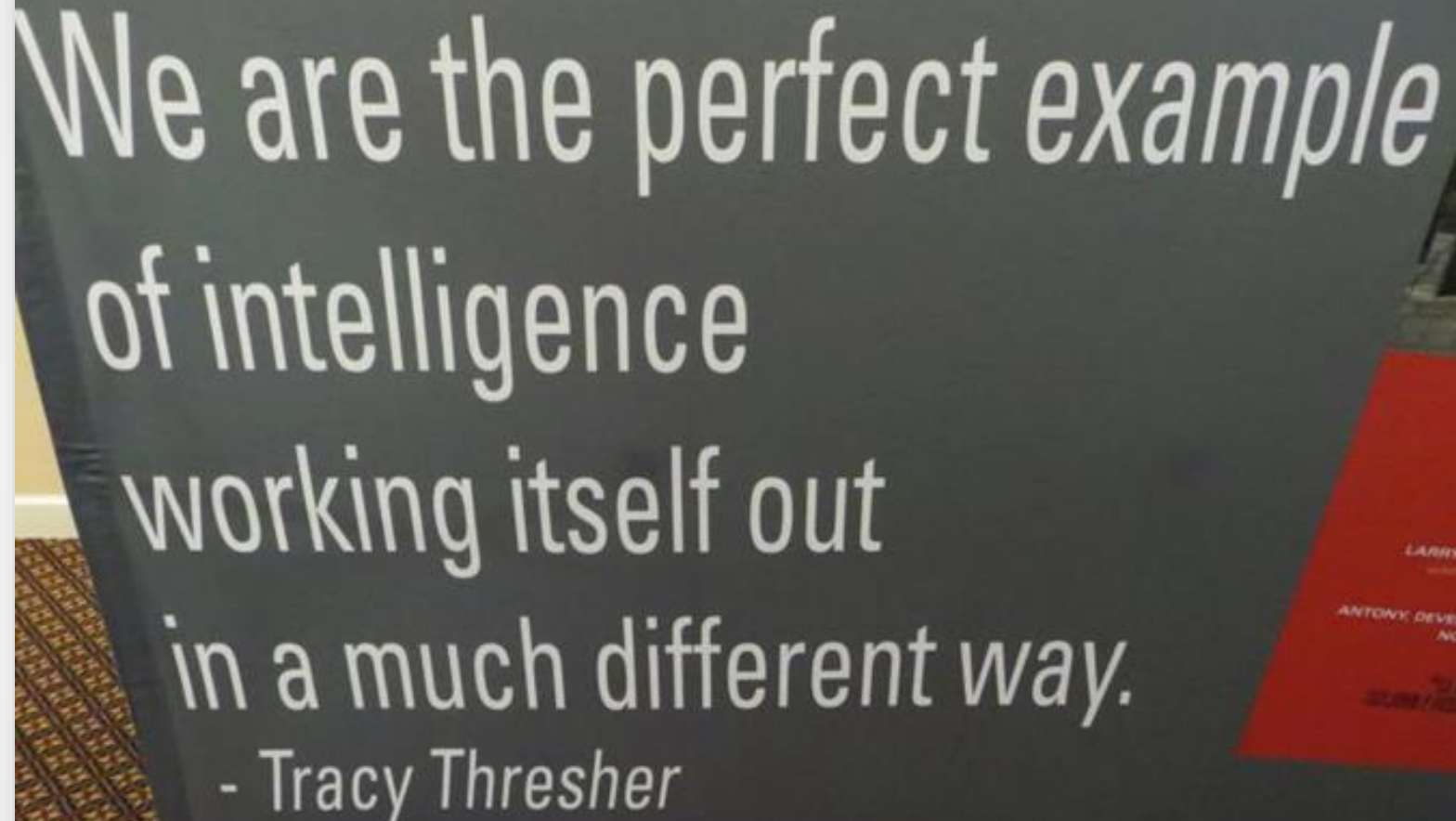
In my profession as an advocate I travel around the country- and beyond, to teach people about advocacy, autism, movement differences, and communication. I live, breathe, and think about quality of life initiatives. I am passionate about where our country is going as far as education and services for all citizens are concerned.

My work is cut out for me with travel, typing, and presenting to teach the presumption of competence, and I am fired up with possibility. The presumption of competence is the key to opening the barriers people may have in their minds.



Working in this field of communication and rights for all jazzes my motivation to connect and work with as many people as humanly possible. As our society is exposed to the thinking, and true reality, that presuming competence only increases one's quality of life, I can rest easy at night knowing that I have done my part.





We are the perfect *example*
of intelligence
working itself out
in a much different *way*.
- Tracy Thresher

The background image shows a book cover with a dark grey background and a red spine. The text is in a white, sans-serif font. The word "example" and "way" are in italics. The quote is attributed to Tracy Thresher.



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